

THE HISTORIAN'S QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What is history?

History is the attempt to understand ourselves as human beings, and understand what we're capable of, for better or for worse, through the study of those who lived before us. A study that must be as thorough as possible through the mediation of sources that allow us to have a wide-ranging and all-encompassing outlook on the women and men of the past. For this reason, history is also a great lesson in methodology, because our knowledge and our ability to know the more or less recent past is intimately linked to the traces that people have left of their passage on this earth.

2. How important is the past to the present?

Any question we ask history or the past necessarily stems from the present. As people we question what we are and what we have become by looking backwards. Hence past and present are linked by a very tight connection that cannot be undone. Fortunately, it cannot be undone. We need to be extremely aware of this, we must be aware that the past is always there and obviously cannot be changed because it has already happened, but that by shifting our gaze we can see it in a different light. And so knowledge evolves, both knowledge of what has happened and knowledge of ourselves.

3. How can we humanize history?

When people talk about history, they often talk about history with a capital H, i.e. political, diplomatic and military history, in other words, the history of power. Yet it's important that we humanise history through a bottom-up approach that takes into account the lived experience of women and men, balancing this with the broader context and without letting individual biographies become necessarily representative, although they can tell us a lot, but obviously not everything, about an entire historical era. I think this is a risk worth taking, because by humanising history we realise how much the study of the past always speaks to us.

4. How do we choose which stories to tell?

It isn't always easy to choose which stories to study, investigate and narrate. We need to balance the need for elsewhere and otherness, the need to study and understand something that is far removed from us, with the need to speak to the world of today, our sensibilities and what we have become as human beings. We have a limited number of opportunities to devote ourselves to the study of an existence that is not our own, thus we must ponder our choices very carefully. At the same time, we must remember that if we devote ourselves to real stories, we must also have great respect for the lives of others, in whatever form we choose to represent the results of our research.

5. How many ways can a true story be told?

There are definitely countless ways to tell a true story. The current separation between fiction and non-fiction indicates that this, and not its denial, is important. However you want to recall the facts, history in our case, it is a knowledge that is documented and verifiable, and should be treated as such. Obviously form is significant, but its relevance is somewhat negligible if the task we're undertaking, also an epistemological one, is clear. That is, the reconstruction of something that actually happened becomes its representation, because that is what it is, but one which returns to what happened in order to recount it.

6. Will we ever know, discover, understand everything?

It's fundamental to be aware of one's own limitations. It is so in general and even more so when we study and investigate the past and study and investigate lives that are not our own. We must be fully aware that we will never know everything and that we will never understand everything. Obviously this shouldn't prevent us from trying to know everything and understand everything through the traces that are left behind and our sources. One of the greatest tasks of the historian is to cross-reference traces and sources, making extensive use, particularly in the case of 20th century history, of witnesses and oral or written accounts of those who were there and can make a fundamental contribution to research. Research, after all, is never an individual adventure, but always a collective one.

7. Do “objective” investigations exist?

History cannot be objective. Whoever conducts research or creates a narrative is a person, a subject with personal convictions, a socio-cultural background, interests, values; something always moves them. So it's important to express this condition: it can be done in more traditional terms, for example in the introduction of the work, or throughout the

work itself, presenting the investigative self, telling the story of the research, the story of the questions that move it and the tools used to try and find answers. Deontology is a fundamental issue, and there must always be intellectual honesty alongside the investigative self, yet objectivity cannot exist.

8. How much should we reveal behind the scenes?

Every trace left by human beings can acquire importance, even the most bureaucratic documents or those sources that are not considered particularly relevant by their contemporaries. The reason is posterity. Posterity comes with questions, and then it becomes clear that everything is a source, and that every trace left by those who preceded us on this earth can be enormously important. First of all, it depends on the questions we ask ourselves. And we know that the ultimate goal must be to give three-dimensionality to the past and constantly reflect on humanity, because it's human beings we're talking about. When we talk about our research we must remember that everything we come in contact with in some way allows us to retrace those lives.

9. Who will tell our story?

A big question for the future is who will tell our story and how they will tell it, because humanity has never been so literate and has never produced so many sources. There are all kinds of sources, from written to audio-visual ones, to those produced by human beings in synergy with machines or by machines without the presence of human beings to guide them. It is an immense challenge, it is a challenge that the next generations will have to face and from which we will learn, because the historical method will be put to the test and it will have to be updated. I'm sure that it will be done egregiously, but I am also very reassured by the fact that I will not have to face this challenge expected to be enormous.

